

DEFENSE WEEK

17 June 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 15

Big Soviet Buildup Foreseen

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U.S. intelligence is now predicting a large rise in Soviet nuclear warhead numbers—over a thousand this year and possibly 8,000 more by the end of the decade. These numbers reportedly are contained in the CIA series called National Intelligence Estimate, the latest issue of which is coded NIE-11-3-885.

One usually reliable source says the intelligence assessment—on which President Reagan was briefed recently—shows “the world balance of power will have greatly shifted by the 1990s.”

In the past six months, the United States has detected a number of new nuclear systems being deployed by the Soviets. The Russians have also accelerated construction of anti-ballistic missile systems.

The report, for the first time, alludes to a possible Soviet “break-out” from the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty through the fielding of a nationwide ABM system to intercept U.S. missiles. This could occur by 1990, the NIE reports.

The report comes during the same week that President Reagan unexpectedly decided to continue to abide by the SALT II Treaty limits beyond its scheduled expiration at the end of this year. Reagan's decision will require the United States to withdraw a Poseidon nuclear-missile-bearing submarine within six months of the sea trials of the Trident sub, USS Alaska. Those tests, off the Connecticut coast, are scheduled for this fall.

As compared with the last official U.S. estimates of 9,000, the National Intelligence Estimate says the Soviet Union will, by the year's end, have 11,500 strategic missile warheads. (The United States has some 8,000 nuclear warheads, on average each one-third of the explosive power of the Soviet warheads.)

In the years 1986 to 1990 the Soviet Union is projected by the NIE to add an additional 8,000 nuclear warheads to its arsenal of 11,500. (By contrast, the United States plans at present only to add modestly to its strategic warhead numbers.)

Evidence of the big Soviet nuclear buildup through this year is in the form of intelligence about the deployment of the latest two Soviet intercontinental nuclear systems, the large SS-24 missile and the smaller SS-25.

Twenty bases are being prepared for the SS-25 missiles. At each base, nine sheds with retractable roofs are under construction, but observation of the operations suggests the plan is for 10 missiles to be deployed at each base. The Soviet plan for these road-mobile missiles is for at least one missile per base always to be in the field, so the scheme is assessed as a total of 200 missiles (20 bases of 10 missiles each). Though the SS-25s have been tested as single warhead missiles, one source says they are actually capable of carrying three warheads, and that the force being deployed this year will therefore add 600 nuclear warheads to the Soviet arsenal.

The United States has complained that the SS-25 tests with a single warhead are deceptive because they use only a fraction of the available “throw-weight” or carrying capacity of the missile. Under the SALT agreements, tests with warheads are supposed to use at least 50 percent of available throw-weight.

Some SS-25s are classed in the latest intelligence estimate as already deployed. An old SS-7 base at Yurya, now used to base intermediate range SS20s, has operational SS-25 missiles. One SS-25 in its launching canister on its wheeled launcher was photographed under camouflage nets at Yurya recently, according to the source. The other operational SS-25 base is at Yashkarola.

Also being deployed now by the Soviets are 100 SS-24s, a large 10-warhead nuclear missile similar in design to the long-delayed MX missile. These SS-24s are being deployed out of two bases in the An-changel area, of northern European Russia. Fifty SS-24s are being deployed at the “test center”

of Plesetsk, alongside 200 single warhead SS-16s. Another 50 SS-24s are being deployed immediately at Kostroma, where some have been observed replacing SS-17s in existing silos. At Plesetsk, says U.S. intelligence, there are signs that the SS-24s are going to be deployed immediately as rail-mobile missiles. In this form they are carried in a railroad freight train.

Another new development reported is the addition of another 40 Tu-95 Bear H cruise missile carrying bombers, which has increased the number of Soviet strategic nuclear delivery vehicles to 2,544.

President Reagan was briefed on these developments recently by the CIA. The staff of the National Security Council has said it supports congressional briefings on the new intelligence. The Senate Armed Services Committee and defense appropriations subcommittee are being urged by conservative senators to hold an unusual joint hearing on the subject.

The White House has also hinted that a declassified version of the report will be made public shortly.